

A Modest Proposal

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Has March Madness ever been madder or is it just me? Each year at this time I am amazed at the amount of media attention given to this multi-million dollar entertainment extravaganza produced by the NCAA. Each year at this time I am increasingly perplexed by how any of this might relate to the educational mission of an American university.

I am equally amazed by the willingness of people to give credence to the thousands of games over the previous ten days that come under the category of "Conference Tournaments." After playing anywhere from eighteen to twenty-two conference games to see who is the best team, all of that is rendered irrelevant by the staging of these tournaments. This means that the only thing really at stake in the regular season is the seeding order for the tournament. Twenty games to determine seeding followed by a one loss and out tournament. Tournament champions not conference champions get an automatic invitation to the NCAA field of sixty-four.

What all this means is that teams already highly ranked and thus insured of being in the field of sixty-four have little or no incentive to win the conference tournament. As a result many of the top teams in a conference lose early in the conference tournament. Both the Big Ten and SEC demonstrated this process very nicely this year as Indiana, Purdue, Ohio State, Kentucky, Florida, and Tennessee were gone in the first and second round of their tournaments, but all will be in the NCAA tournament.

Why then the conference tournament? Money, Money, Money. The conferences are amply rewarded for providing the much-needed television programming, and of course this keeps the conference offices running and pays the bloated salaries of conference bureaucrats whose main responsibility seems to be running the conference tournaments.

In the meantime this further disrupts the student part of the student-athlete. With conference tournaments and the three rounds of the NCAA tournament play the students who play hoops for the most successful teams will miss at least half their classes in the month of March. In addition they will be distracted from academic life by their preoccupation with March Madness and left exhausted by practices, games, press demands and transcontinental travel schedules. All of this is justified by the same people who insist that a Division I football playoff

would lead to the loss of too much class time by the student athlete.

It is time to shut down the universities of America for the month of March so that students and student athletes can concentrate on what is truly important. If the television people and the NCAA can dictate starting times of games and order teams to travel across the continent, certainly they have the power to shut down the universities. They can do this in the name of education, claiming to be protectors of the student athletes, preventing them from losing too much class time and thus disrupting their education. Putting everyone on a one-month spring break would also appreciably enhance the economies of the Sun Belt states or at least the ones with beaches.

The Madness of March has received a boost this year from the saga of the NCAA and St. John's University. Their star player, Erick Barkley, has been suspended twice this season by the NCAA for violations involving the payment of his tuition at a Maine prep school by someone associated with the Riverside Church basketball league, an institution that has more to do with high powered basketball than the gospels.

As for St. John's it is good to see them publicly divesting their academic integrity and being chastised by the NCAA. Unlike 1951 the University's reputation can not be protected by a friendly District Attorney and alumni among the New York detectives.

After the second suspension Barkley was ordered to pay \$3,500 to a charity for having taken money for his tuition. One can only wonder where a college student will get that kind of money. Certainly not an agent or booster!

This past week the NCAA announced that they were investigating Barkley's SAT score and testing process, Barkley got into a fight with a teammate at the halftime of a game, and after the game Barkley announced that he was leaving the team. St. John's coach Mike Jarvis, who is rapidly losing his credibility in his self-proclaimed role as educator, denied that a fight had taken place and said that Barkley was under too much stress. Barkley returned for Sunday's game, and then after St. John's received their NCAA bid Jarvis said that he was really proud of his players because they came to play every night. As Barkley and his teammates waited for the news of the tournament at the ESPNZone in Manhattan (and who was paying for that?) Barkley sat apart from his teammates.

Barkley's case demonstrates once again that some players should choose the CBA or a European league rather than the college game to hone their skills for the NBA. It also illustrates that for Mike Jarvis and St. John's winning is the only thing. If a player walks off the team in a dramatic announcement to the press, why is no one surprised that he can simply show up the next day and reclaim his spot on the team? Would a bench player under "great stress" get that same treatment from Jarvis? Is all this laughable?

Not to worry, this is only a small detour on the Road to the Final Four. If St. John's moves down that Road and makes it to Indianapolis for the finals, who will care about all this disruption, deception, petulance, and nonsense. If Erick Barkley is a high draft pick by the NBA who will care about his SAT's, his tuition payments, the \$3,500, or his education?

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